

Articles Written for Rev Madihe Pannasiha Mahanayaka Thero

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Ancient Centers of Buddhist Learning

- a look in retrospect

Madihe Paññāsīha Mahānāyaka Thera

In ancient Buddhist history it is recorded that the message of Buddhism came to be delivered at the request of Brahma Sahampati who made it known to the Buddha that there was in the world a great need for it. It was to be a supply in response to a demand. Many would have suffered in the absence of it.

Desetu bhante Bhagavā dhammaṃ desetu Sugato dhammaṃ. Santi sattā apparajakkhajātikā assavanatā dhammassa parihāyanti. Bhavissanti dhammassa aññātāro ' ti. M.N.I.168

The Buddha himself turned out to be the source of supply. And there was an unflinching emergence of those in need of it. The very first center of teaching and learning thus came to be set up, soon after the preaching of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, with the remaining four of the Pañcavaggiyā bhikkhu, barring Aññāta Koṇḍañña who gained the *dhamma-cakkhu* at the conclusion of the first sermon.

Imasmiṃ pana veyyākaraṇasmim bhaññamāne āyasmato Koṇḍaññassa virajaṃ vītamaḷaṃ dhammacakkahaṃ udapādi yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhamman 'ti. Vin.I.11.

This is also to be noted as the first transmission from teacher to pupil, of the scriptural tradition in Buddhism. We would also call this the first setting up of the *Pariyatti sāsana* or the Mission of Learning. Not only for the successful continuance of the Dispensation but also for the fulfillment of the spiritual aspirations of the religion, for which the tradition of reliable learning had to be secured. *Pariyattiṃ vinā dhammo na tiṭṭhati kudācanaṃ*. It is the deep conviction of this idea that gave rise to the evolution of the valuable *Bhāṇaka* tradition by the time of the First Council or the *Paṭhama Saṅgīti*.

It is in the wake of this awareness that the great Buddhist universities of India began to appear, commencing almost from the early centuries of the Christian era. It is believed that the renowned University of Nalanda in Rajagriha, in the home town of Venerable Sariputta grew out of the monastic residence of the famous Madhyamaka scholar Nagarjuna who lived there around the second century A.D. Venerable Aryadeva is said to have lived there about the third century. It assumed the stature of a university about the fifth century, under the patronage of the Gupta king Sakrāditya.. The Chinese scholar monk Hsuan Tsang (637-643) reports that there were as many as ten thousand residents there at the time of his arrival, of whom seven thousand were students. They are believed to have been multi-ethnic and international.

Valabhi on the coastal regions of Kathiawar was contemporary with Nalanda. It also was set up under royal patronage about the fifth century. Hsuan Tsang records its student numbers as being well over six thousand. I Tsing in the seventh century records its international reputation as being not second to Nalanda. Vikramasila sprang up in Magadha, to the east of Nalanda, about the eighth century. It was closely linked with Tibet.

These notes are presented here in brief to show the wide popularity of Buddhist studies at the higher centers of learning in ancient India and that it was through a great deal of honest and sincere royal patronage. We would love to see it being revived and repeated.



The Bodhi Tree in the Name of the Buddha

Aggamahāpaṇḍita Madihe Paññāsīha Mahānāyaka Thera

In the history of any institution, a period of fifty years is a considerable length of run. We are glad to learn that the Bodhi tree at the Sri Lankaramaya in the City of Singapore is entitled now to celebrate its Golden Jubilee of fifty years of existence. Having very fresh memories yet of the inauguration of this Buddhist Vihara here more than half a century ago, we have a legitimate sense of pride of what Sri Lankaramaya has stood up for. Above all, under the banner of Buddhism, it has unified the diverse ethnic groups of Singapore in their loyalty and allegiance to the Buddha and his religion.

With us, the word ***bodhi*** stands for the highest glory of Buddhism. Our Lord and Master, the most revered Gotama is called the Buddha, because he reached his final liberation in Nirvana through the perfection of his wisdom or ***Paññā***. This highest state of wisdom is called by different names as ***bodhi***, ***sambodhi*** and ***sammāsambodhi***. It is the product of the **three-fold culture** of Buddhism which is collectively referred to as ***tisso sikkhā*** and consists of ***sīla***, ***samādhi*** and ***paññā***.

More than twenty-five centuries ago, it was under a fig tree by the name of *ficus religiosa* that our Bodhisatta Gotama attained his enlightenment which entitled him to be called the Buddha. He also came to be called ***Sabbaññū*** or **Omniscient One**. Thereafter this tree came to be called the Bodhi or the Tree of Enlightenment. Buddhist stories record that the Buddha himself took serious note of this, namely the companionship of the Bodhi Tree in the hour of his achievement. It is said that he spent the second week after his enlightenment casting a respectful glance at the tree [*dutiyañ ca animmisam*]. This is interpreted as the expression of his sense of gratitude and his deep admiration of the

inanimate world in whose midst we live and our closeness to it.

Through this intimacy of close association and friendship, the Bodhi soon became his counterpart. A story in the Jataka collection, the *Kālingabodhi Jātaka*, tells us that while the Buddha was still alive, his close disciple and personal attendant Ananda had a seedling of the original Bohi tree at Gaya under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment planted at the entrance to the Jetavana monastery. This he did, it is claimed at the request of the Buddha, in order to provide an object of worship in the absence of the Master from the monastery, to the thronging crowds who used to come to pay him homage. This shrine subsequently gained wide popularity as the **Ananda-Bodhi**.

It would be most natural to assume that the first priority of the Buddhists in paying veneration to the Buddha would be personal adoration to the Buddha himself. The Buddha himself suggested that after his final passing away, his bodily relics could be enshrined in a *stūpa* or pagoda and that veneration could be directed towards it through the offering of flowers, lights, incense and even musical adoration. This is well and truly *Buddha-vandanā*.

In the history of *cetiya* worship in Buddhism, the *stūpa* takes the first place as enshrining the bodily remains themselves of the Master [*sārīrika*]. Second comes the Bodhi Tree as something closely associated with him [*pāribhogika*]. Lastly evolved, and also being merely symbolic [*uddesika*], the Buddha image takes the last place. But if a Buddha relic comes to be enshrined within it, it surpasses all others and comes to the fore front.

This in brief is an explanation of the why and wherefore of object veneration in Buddhism. Old world concepts like idol worship, based on narrow-minded and self-opinionated thinking, were bad enough for the twentieth century. The next millennium should harbour no more of these.



Personal Identity and Peaceful Coexistence

Aggamahāpaṇḍita Madihe Paññāsīha Mahā Nāyaka Thaera

Sri Lanka

Today, in the world we live in, the recognition of biodiversity or the multiplicity of life forms that inhabit it, has become a crucial factor. Those who possess adequate scientific knowledge and insight and are honest about making known the truth as truth emphasize the significant inter-relatedness of everything in the universe for its harmonious and successful continuance. This ranges from man, animal and plant even up to things which are considered inanimate. This is what has generated the world's admirable concept of conservation. And we are made aware that vanishing species are not necessarily the outcome of natural evolution. It is a reflection of man's recklessness.

In Buddhist thinking, personal identity assumes special significance on the basis that nothing sentient in the world chooses to be destroyed. This is how the Dhammapada presents this Buddhist outlook. 'All dread destruction and all dread death. To all, life is dear. Putting oneself in that position, one should never bring about destruction of another.'

Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa sabe bhāyanti maccuno

Attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye. Dhp. v. 129

With a philosophic background that nothing in the world was created for man, to be destroyed and consumed by him for his personal benefit, Buddhist culture, well beyond its religious perimeter, presents a world view of '**live and let live.**' To a world of today which thoughtlessly devours its unreplenishable resources, this should serve both as a grim reminder and wise counseling.

Few in the world today would look upon multi-ethnicity as a meaningful product of creation. Whether or not, it is seen to be a source of utter confusion and conflict. Like the much less wanted appendix in the human body, multi-

ethnicity in the world appears to be no more than a vestigial survival. As long as it does not turn septic, it can be tolerated. Let us accept it and not exploit it too much or too far. This would be a very sound view which all Sri Lankans abroad can take. But today, even away from their own homeland, Sri Lankan is not the last unit to which these people can be reduced. Both ethnicity and religion have cut through it. All the world over, seasonal provocations work at the process of splintering, from larger bodies to further and further smaller ones. It is the same world over, in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Sri Lanka.

As settlers in foreign lands, Sri Lankans should present to the host country greater homogeneity than conflicting diversity. Both in theory and in practice of multiculturalism, this would be most acceptable to them. Immigrants cannot afford to be a thorn in the flesh of the host country, too long. Let us be practical and begin where we can. I value this realism rather than pay lip service to unattainable ambitious goals.. If anything more magnanimous like inter-ethnic integration is not possible, begin at least at the level of the Sinhalese. While we have satisfactorily overcome among ourselves, already at home, sociological factors like caste and creed and divisions of upcountry and low country, religious incision of Buddhist and non-Buddhist still seems to remain. These are no more secrets at home or abroad. No matter from where the pressures come. If our primary and final goal is a unified Sri Lanka in spite of its ethnic diversity, then let us choose the correct basis of operation. Let not ethnicity or religious identity be a divisive force in this process.

Sri Lanka, with its more than twenty-three centuries old Buddhist culture which many historians and social scientists have unmistakably identified and recognized, and eloquently spoken about, can present to the world of the twenty-first century, a message of sober and level-headed good living. Let the Sri Lankans in Malaysia forget their caste and creed differences which they could have accidentally brought along with their bag and baggage. So should they also shed their symbols of social status, their affluence, differences of their professions and careers. Their modes of conduct, their quality of life, the way

they bring up their children with offense to none at home or in society, these are the matters with which we should be seriously concerned. Their characteristic politeness, their genuine sense of love and charity which are part of their Sri Lankan Buddhist culture must manifest themselves in their new homeland. These must be felt and sensed by our hosts in public and in private: in the shopping mall, while one uses public transport and in all public places like schools and hospitals etc. People here would highly value your contribution. This is what I mean when I speak of personal identity and peaceful coexistence.

I appreciate very much the services rendered to the land and its people by the **Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple**. I congratulate everybody concerned. I wish the **Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple** great success in the years to come.

May all beings be well and happy. May there be peace on earth and goodwill among men.

Siri Vajiranana Dharmayatanaya
Maharagama
Sri Lanka